



Violin

To Judge or Not to Judge

By Sally O'Reilly

This time of year we in Minnesota are awash in string competitions. Each of these competitions requires one or more judges, people who are willing to give their time and expertise, usually for very modest (if any) remuneration. Those of us who accept the challenge and responsibility of fair, knowledgeable adjudication provide a valuable service to the musical community. But all is not roses for judges. Judges are adored by those who win and disliked by those who don't.

Recently I agreed to be the sole judge for the national semi-finals of ASTA WITH NSOA's Junior Violin Division. My responsibility was to choose the violin finalists for the national competition. The first thing I had to do was to tell my own junior-level student that she couldn't enter because, even though the tapes would be anonymous, I wasn't about to flirt with the possibility that I could be accused of a conflict of interest.

I received fifty-three tapes and CDs for review, and out of those I selected eight finalists. It was a time-consuming process that made me keenly aware of the importance of my own ability to concentrate and remain alert. I was reminded that ours is an *aural* art form and that, when we judge, we need to do so primarily with our ears. In the ASTA WITH NSOA process, I was not distracted by a visual component and could focus totally on the quality of the playing. Now that my duties are completed, I can only hope that my choices were good ones and that people who hear these finalists at the live audition won't say, "What on earth *was* she thinking!?" As a teacher who judges outside the state and who has students who frequently compete on the state, national, and international scene, I'd like to list some DOs and DON'Ts for prospective judges.

1. Know the literature you're judging. If a piece has a cadenza or a particularly difficult section, try to hear it. I judged a big competition in Dallas where I heard a boy playing a fine performance of the Tchaikovsky Concerto. I immediately pegged him

as a possible winner. I know that the second half of the first movement is more difficult than the first half so I let him continue after the cadenza and he promptly unraveled. This competition was for a performance with orchestra. He and I both would have looked very foolish if I had taken that second half for granted. Note: He did not win.

2. Give the contestant your full attention. Sit still and refrain from writing if at all possible.
3. Try not to bury your nose in the music. It looks as though you don't know the repertoire.
4. Avoid speaking to contestants before they play, except when indicating that they may begin.
5. If you are at close range with the contestant, smile and say "Thank you" when the playing is completed. No other comments, please.
6. Close your eyes and *listen* to the tone, intonation, rhythmic accuracy, phrasing, and dynamics. Judge with your ears!
7. Don't try to "give a lesson" with your comments. General comments are always taken more seriously by both student and teacher than specific ones ("measure 131 blah blah blah"). Positives ("expressive phrasing") or negatives ("your right shoulder is high"), give support or ammunition to the teacher.
8. Always keep comments polite. Avoid sarcasm at all cost and remember that a negative comment ("you have poor posture") never carries the weight of a positive suggestion ("if you stand up straight, your sound will project better").
9. Comments about personal appearance are best left to the teacher. We never know what thin ice we may be treading on. Examples: 1) Janos Starker was giving a cello masterclass in San Francisco and a female cellist came out wearing ungainly platform shoes. He immediately asked, "Why are you wearing such dreadful shoes?"

Her reply, in broken English, was, "They are all I have." 2) A brilliant young pianist was criticized for playing with his mouth slightly ajar. The judge couldn't know that he'd had nose surgery recently and couldn't yet breathe any other way. *Please* judge with your ears first and foremost!

10. Don't presume to know a performer's emotional connection to a piece except by the way it *sounds*.
11. If you have a long day of judging, don't assume that you can remember a contestant clearly who played earlier in the day. If you have doubts, try to arrange a "call back."

I urge everyone to see PBS's *The Art of the Violin*. In its two hours we get to see performances by the 20th century's greatest violinists including Heifetz, Milstein, Menuhin, Szeryng, Oistrakh and Kogan. All of these legends had one thing in common — no mannerisms. They stood still and took care of business. There were no bumps and grinds, no mugging, no flapping hair ... just pure music. As judges, we need to resist the influence of facial expressions or body movements unless they are impediments to accuracy.

We must not allow our art to be hijacked by pop culture. When concert artists begin to appear on stage with navels showing a la Britney Spears, we are in big trouble.

Some Afterthoughts on Ethics

1. Never judge a contest in which one of your own students or former students is a participant. When my student, Angela Fuller, was a finalist in the Irving Klein Competition, Camilla Wicks withdrew as a judge because she had worked with Angela for a few months many years earlier. When Angela won the competition there could be no doubt that it was fair and square.
2. Don't judge more than one competition a season in the same city

or region. We like to think that we can approach the same competitors with a fresh slate, but we are human and our biases are hard to shake.

3. Competitions are not appropriate places to “shop” for students.
4. Always sign your comments clearly. Only cowards remain anonymous.

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